

## Reading and Writing Workshop

Chapter 4, "Getting Ready," Atwell, Nancie. (1998). *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Second Edition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Carolyn's comments are in *italics*. Atwell's text is not.

### *Why this text?*

- *You will be reading mostly Atwell's text, with my comments and questions interspersed. From this text, I hope you will learn about a way of teaching both reading and writing that allows young students to use adult/professional ways of approaching reading and writing.*
- *Additionally, Atwell is a master teacher. Her ways of organizing and managing a classroom in which students are learning at their own pace may help you to think about how you organize a music classroom.*
- *Finally, while few teachers use reading/writing workshop exclusively, most teachers (k-12) recognize the importance of writing process and authentic writing experiences, which are part of Atwell's method. If you become aware of these teaching methods, you will be able to support students who want to write about music in their language arts classrooms.*

### *Your response*

*Throughout this text, I will ask you to think about questions and issues. At the end of your reading, take a couple of the most interesting (to you) questions and write about those for your discussion post.*

Be regular and ordinary in your life like a bourgeois so that you may be violent and original in your work.

Gustave Flaubert

- *Atwell begins her text with a quote from Flaubert, who was a famous 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer. You might know his most famous novel, *Madame Bovary*, which is a "violent and original" novel.*
- *This quote captures Atwell's main approach to writing, which is to create a classroom routine that is absolutely predictable so that students can have the freedom to take significant personal risks in their writing.*
- *How does being "regular and ordinary" contribute to being "violent and original" in music performance?*

*Atwell begins by dropping us right into the events of her classroom. One thing I notice about her writing is that it is vivid—you can see the excitement of her students in this scenario:*

One spring day Donald Graves and Mary Ellen Giacobbe drove up from New Hampshire to visit Boothbay Region Elementary School. My kids had been hearing about Don and Mary Ellen for a long time, so this visit was a special occasion. Bert

happened to be passing through the front lobby when they arrived. He took the stairs to the junior high wing three at a time, then whipped down our corridor like some eighth-grade Paul Revere, shouting as he passed each room, "The world's most famous writing teachers are here! The world's most famous writing teachers are here!"

With Donald Graves in attendance during writing workshop, no one moved off into one of the peer-conference corners—a first. Instead they sat at their desks writing away in absolute and eerie silence. Every now and then one writer or another chanced a glance to locate Graves as he moved among them conferring, all of them dying for him to drop by and whisper the magic entree, "Tell the about your writing." Bert's anticipation was rewarded. Don knelt by his desk for a long chat about Bert's passion for sci-fi and Stephen King.

It was a good day. Taking themselves seriously as writers, the kids expected that Mary Ellen and Don would take them seriously, too. At the end of the day Graves came and stood in my doorway with his coat on, smiling. "What are you smiling about?" I asked.

"I'm smiling at you," he said. "You know what makes you such a good writing teacher?"

Oh God, I thought. Here it comes: validation from one of the world's most famous writing teachers. In a split second I flipped through the best possibilities. Was he going to remark on the piercing intelligence of my conferences? My commitment to the kids? My sensitivity to written language?

"What?" I asked.

He answered, "You're so damned organized."

Then Don stopped smiling, probably in response to the way my face must have crumpled. "Look," he explained seriously. "You can't teach writing this way if you're not organized. This isn't an open-classroom approach, and you know it. It's people like you and Mary Ellen who make the best writing and reading teachers. You two always ran a tight ship and you still do, but it's a different kind of ship."

*Here is the central irony: in order to have the freedom to be creative, one has to have the rigidity of organization. In order for students to achieve, they need not just a teacher who lets them do what they want, but a teacher who is willing to run a tight ship. But then, you are a musician, and you understand this paradox better than most teachers.*

A workshop is a different kind of ship. From the beginning of my attempts to teach using a workshop approach, I've had to organize and reorganize my room and myself to support writing, reading, learning, and teaching. And as Graves suggested, I had to define organization in a new way. I don't mean neatness—a good thing, too, because meticulousness will never feature among my virtues. By organization I mean discovering what writers and readers need and providing plenty of it in a predictable setting.

Before any student comes anywhere near my classroom at the beginning of September, I need to get ready for our workshop. This means knowing exactly what I expect will happen, knowing how, where, and when I expect it will happen, and knowing who's expected to do it. I organize myself and the environment in August. My goal is to

establish a context that invites and supports writing and reading so that when my students arrive they'll find what they need to begin to act as writers and readers: time, materials and texts, space, and ways for them, and for me, to monitor our activity, organize our work, and think about what writers and readers in a workshop might do. The challenge of writing about teaching is that it's easy to get bogged down in the theory of it and leave out how things look in practical terms. In the process of showing how writing plays out in students' lives in the following scenarios, she also gives us a glimpse into her classroom.

### ***Making Time***

I pulled my chair up next to Amanda's, and she read her lead aloud. It was a new memoir, about attending Neil Diamond's concert in Portland Friday night with her parents and sister. It began:

"Okay, you're here. Do you want Mrs. Cook's binoculars? If you do, there are three caps you can't lose. Be careful not to let anything happen to them because they're not ours. If you have to go to the bathroom go now, not during the intermission, so you won't get lost and it won't be so crowded. At the end, meet us by the place where the hockey players go in. Okay?"

I recognized Amanda's father's voice. When she finished reading his instructions, I asked her to go on. She had filled two pages with close descriptions of the events of Friday evening and verbatim dialogue—her family's as well as the chatter of the people in the seats around them. I laughed and shook my head. "Amanda, how ever did you remember all this in such detail?"

"Oh, I didn't," she answered. She pulled out a spiral-bound notebook and flipped through its pages. "I knew before we went that I'd want to write about it, so I brought this along and took notes all night on what was going on." Amanda thinks about her writing when she's not writing. She is a habitual writer.

Robbie was at home watching television one night, with school about the furthest thing from his mind. Out of nowhere came the perfect ending for his Maine humor story. He grabbed the only paper he could find and scribbled away. The next day he came to writing workshop armed with a brown paper supermarket bag bearing the perfect ending.

Karalee came to class the same week with the lead of a new narrative scrawled on tiny pieces of telephone-message paper. She explained, "The other night, when I was spending the night at Susan's, I thought up the whole beginning of my short story in my head. Luckily I remembered it until I got to paper." She reshuffled her tiny manuscript, frowned, squinted, and stared off into space. I recognized I'd been dismissed and moved on so she could pick up the threads of her story.

Robbie and Karalee think about their writing when they're not writing; they, too, are habitual writers. Writers need regular, frequent chunks of time they can count on, anticipate, and plan for. Only when I make time for writing in school, designating it a high-priority activity of the English program, will my students develop the habits of mind of writers—and the compulsions. Janet came into class one day and wailed, "Ms. A., my head is CONSTANTLY writing."

*What allows music students to begin to think of themselves as musicians? How do you think as a musician? Have you had the experience of finding yourself thinking about music when you were doing something completely different?*

Graves (1983, 223) recommends allotting at least three class periods a week in order for students to be able to develop and refine their own ideas. When David said to me, "I think of things to write about just before I go to sleep—ideas seem to float into my head like hot air balloons," he is describing a ritual that could never evolve if he were a one-day-a-week writer. Without at least three writing workshops a week (preferably four or five), it will be hard for kids to conceive topics, sustain projects of their own, and behave as writers.

Regular, frequent time for writing also helps students write well. When they have sufficient time to consider and reconsider what they've written, they're more likely to achieve the clarity, logic, voice, conventionality, and grace of good writing. Sandy commented, "If a teacher says, 'Do a completed piece by the end of class and turn it in,' I answer not, 'Yes, I can,' but 'I guess I have no choice.' Having to rush my writing cuts down on thinking time and then on quality." Her friend Jennifer agreed. "When I get stuck, I take a little walk. Then I come back and try it again. I quit and come back and quit and come back because I know I won't write as well unless I give myself time to think."

Sandy, Jenn, and I aren't alone. Hemingway revised the conclusion to *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times. He had—he took—the time he needed to solve any writer's greatest problem: "Getting the words right" (Plimpton 1963, 122). Kurt Vonnegut writes about time as the great leveler. He claims that anyone willing to put in the sheer number of plodding hours it takes can make a go of it as an author:

Novelists . . . have, on the average, about the same IQs as the cosmetic consultants at Bloomingdale's department store. Our power is patience. We have discovered that writing allows even a stupid person to seem halfway intelligent, if only that person will write the same thought over and over again, improving it just a little bit each time. It is a lot like inflating a blimp with a bicycle pump. Anybody can do it. All it takes is time. (1984)

Katherine Paterson, author of the Newbery award-winning *Bridge to Terabithia*, talked about the way a habitual writer's plodding days set the stage for the "good days":

Those are the days you love. The days when somebody has to wake you up and tell you where you are. But there are a lot of days when you're just slogging along. And

you're very conscious of your stuff and the typewriter is a machine and the paper is blank. You've got to be willing to put in those days in order to get the days when it's flowing like magic. (1981)

### ***Does practicing ever feel like this????***

*The main idea behind this type of teaching is to align what happens in the classroom with what professional authors actually do. Presumably, professional authors' methods work for producing texts, so why not help students to adopt a writing process that works? How do professional musicians learn and practice music? How can we bring those methods into the classroom?*

*We need to acknowledge in our teaching of writing the reality of the act of writing. Good writers and writing don't take less time; they take more. Too many accounts of the practices of professional writers have been published—Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews is the best known series—for us to cling to school myths of polished first drafts or weekly deadlines. We need to acknowledge, once and for all, that writers and writing need time.*

Even when students do write every day, growth in writing is slow. It seldom follows a linear movement, with each piece representing an improvement over the last. But regular, frequent time for writing also means regular, frequent occasions for teaching and learning about writing. In context, over a whole year, I teach one or two new conventions or techniques at a time; in context, over a whole year, my kids try out new styles, subjects, rules, genres, forms, devices, marks, and strategies. With adequate time to detour—to take risks and reflect on the results—writers learn how to consider what's working and what needs more work, to apply my teaching to their writing, and to take control.

I continue to learn this lesson. After a summer spent teaching teachers, advising them to be patient with their students because growth in writing takes time, I suffered a rude shock when I went back to the classroom and faced the worst writers who ever breathed air. That September I wrote one seriously depressed letter after another to Mary Ellen Giacobbe. My head was too filled with images of last year's students—writers who had grown a whole year by the time they left me in June—for me to recollect and consider my own good advice to other teachers. By November I was sending Mary Ellen ecstatic letters filled with anecdotes and writing samples; I didn't remember my own advice until I saw my kids begin to prove it by working hard, experimenting, producing, applying what I had taught them, and changing as writers.

*Remember that you will be facing a new bunch of musicians every year, too!*

When students have regular, frequent time set aside to write, writing can also play a crucial role in helping them grow up, making it possible for them to capture who they are, then come back and measure themselves against their earlier selves. Regular time for writing helps give students control over the distance between their pasts and presents. When they can count on time always being there, they learn how to use it—when to confront, and when to wait.

Jennipher waited. Jenn's father died when she was in seventh grade, and in early December of her eighth-grade year she began to write about him. She covered page after page of yellow newsprint.

Without reading or sharing what she'd written, Jenn tucked the yellow sheets away in a pocket of her daily writing folder. "It's too soon," she said. "I'm not ready." She went on to other topics. Twice again, in January and February, she retrieved the yellow sheets, added more, then folded them up and slipped them back into her folder. In March Jenn said, "I think I'd like to write a formal piece about my dad, but not tell it first person. That's too close and too hard." So her formal piece told the story of a girl a lot like Jennipher, with a dad a lot like David Jones.

*WHY?*

"You're too old to cry," she thought as she forced back the tears and tried hard to listen to what the minister was saying.

"But I'm only thirteen," her thoughts interrupted. "This can't be happening to me." Some strong force was building up inside her now, and she wanted to scream. "I can't cry; I can't cry," she thought, holding tightly to her mother's hand. Her mother and brother were both crying.

When the ceremony was finally over, she was the last one to walk down the aisle and out of the church. Her cousin stood by the door. She burst into tears as she hugged her tightly. She was shaking as her cousin helped her down the steps where crowds of people were standing, talking. They were mostly her friends and family. She was hugged by an aunt and started to cry again. "Pull yourself together," she commanded herself, straightening up, wiping the tears from her face.

"It's funny all the time I've had to think in the last couple of days," she wondered, "even with all these people around." But she had thought. She'd thought about all the good times with her dad, about the stories her dad had told her.

He'd died of cancer three days earlier. When her aunt had told her she had cried and kept crying. "But now," she thought, "I can't cry again."

Then she was back at the house after the funeral, fighting through the crowds of *his* friends and family: that was who they really were. She had the chance to see a lot of people, and talk about him and them and herself.

She remembered again the stories he'd told. She loved the tale about the time he'd gone to Texas for treatment; had sat down on the curb waiting for his brother, who was checking the time of his appointment. A kid had come up to him to bum money for bus fare. Her father had asked him where he was from, and the boy replied, "Vermont." Her dad had teasingly responded, "I beat you; I'm from Maine." The boy had said something about his mother coming from a small town in Maine. And it happened that the boy's mother and her dad had grown up in the same town and had dated each other in high school.

Her dad was like that: he could make the whole world seem smaller and happier. Now, the flowers around the house reminded her of the plants and flowers that had bloomed and blossomed under his green thumb. She snapped out of her reverie to realize someone was talking to her.

"He really was the greatest," the voice was saying.

She nodded, dazed, wanting to dwell on thoughts of all the good things about her father. "Why him?" she asked herself. "It's not fair!" The voices were screaming inside her now. It was pure fear.

She pushed the thoughts away and walked upstairs, where most of the kids were hanging out. She smiled and said "Hi" to everyone. And as they talked she forgot all her troubles. But later, when she went downstairs again, she heard someone say, "She has her father's looks, doesn't she?" and someone else replied, "Oh, yes." -

"No!" she thought. But it was true. She had his eyes, his complexion, his hair.

Later in the day she'd once again forgotten everything that was wrong. She was laughing and talking with the others, playing games and watching TV. But in a moment a word triggered all those thoughts of her father, and they came crashing back down on her.

She was so scared—not like being-afraid-of-the-dark scared, but a really deep down, somebody's-dead scared. She knew she would live and keep on living. But she'd still be scared, and maybe she'd have to try hard not to cry sometimes. And maybe every time someone mentioned cancer, or she read the word in a book, there would be an empty space somewhere in her stomach. Maybe someday she'd forget, or maybe someday she wouldn't. But her heart held one, great hope: that when she grew up, she might be as good a person as her dad had been.

Jemipher Jones

*Pretty good writing, huh?*

Jennipher benefited, academically and personally, from the steady availability of time in school to write—and to read. Over a long career of having to explain my teaching methods to parents and administrators, the daily time I made at Boothbay Elementary for students' independent reading was the most questioned of all my questionable practices. It looked as if nothing was happening. The principal even made the classic administrator's comment when he came in one day to observe and found me circulating among my reading students: "I'll come back when you're teaching," he whispered. I responded to concerns about reading workshop by explaining my rationale for inviting students to sit (or, shudder, lie) around my classroom with their noses stuck in books. I

cited research that indicates, study upon study, that the best readers are those who read a lot. I justified my practices by pointing to state and national progress reports that show that Maine and US. thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds read less than our nine-year olds, both in school and out. And I explained about adolescents and the social upheaval in their lives that leads to fewer and fewer occasions for reading.

Reading takes a backseat in anyone's life when life becomes impossibly full. During the first two years of my daughter's life I didn't read a single novel. My students' lives are often similarly full—of sports, clubs, babysitting, homework, chores, music and dance and voice lessons, first jobs, first loves, and killer social lives. Amanda, a former student, anticipated April vacation of her freshman year of high school by informing me, "Ms. Atwell, I'm going to read six books this week. All of them are books I've been dying to read since Christmas. I just look at them and feel depressed. There's always something else I've got to do."

After the first year of reading workshop I could justify the provision of time to read in school by pointing to what my students accomplished as readers. At Boothbay, where reading was scheduled as a separate class and my kids read an average of thirty-five books, their scores on standardized tests averaged at the seventy-second percentile, up from an average at the fifty-fourth percentile. In June more than 90 percent of students indicated that they regularly read at home for pleasure—that they were taking home the books they read during the workshop. When I asked how many books they owned, the average figure they gave was ninety-eight, up from September's average of fifty-four. I have no way of knowing whether they did, in fact, own more books. I do know that they perceived themselves as the sort of people who acquire and collect libraries.

This is the kind of evidence that begins to convince doubting administrators and parents: students read more, comprehend better, and value books and reading to a greater degree when we make time in school for them to read.

Today I see my seventh and eighth graders four days a week for one ninety-minute language arts block that includes both writing and reading. Within the block I try to carve out time each day for a poem, a writing or reading minilesson, independent writing and conferring, a brief read-aloud from a novel or short story, and time for independent reading, usually fifteen to twenty minutes a day. In addition every student's baseline



homework assignment every night is to read for at least another half hour: to create a routine--a time and place in their lives--for behaving as a reader at home.

Over the past three years at the Center for Teaching and Learning, between the seventy minutes a week I provide in class and the time I assign them to make at home, my students read an average of twenty-nine books, September through June. Although briefer than I—and they—would like, the in-class time sets a tone and creates a milieu: a group of kids and a teacher who read together and talk about books. It's time enough to get students so hooked on their books that they want to take them home to find out what happens next. And it gives me time to circulate among my students, record what they're reading and how far they've gotten, find out what they think of it, and help them find books when they're stuck or when they don't understand it's okay to abandon a book they don't love.

A minilesson is a short lesson about a reading or writing strategy, genre, idea, etc. Within this type of teaching (reading/writing workshop), the minilesson can be given to the whole class or it can be given to a small group of students that might benefit from the information.

When I sit down with my plan book in August, I write Writing-Reading Workshop every place on my schedule that it would otherwise say English. The workshop isn't an add-on; it is the English course—here, everything that can be described as language arts is taught as sensibly as it can be taught, in the context of whole pieces of students' writing and whole literary works.

If my schedule consisted of fifty-minute periods for English, writing and literature included, I'd continue to give over class time to writing and reading workshop. Below I've sketched two options for using the five periods and assigning homework, so that students can experience the sense of continuity and routine that writers and readers need. I would give the bulk of the fifty-minute periods to writing, because, of the two disciplines, it's where kids need the most hands-on help, teacher demonstrations, and structured time.

Time for independent writing and reading isn't the icing on the cake, the reward we proffer the senior honors students who survived the English curriculum. Writing and reading *are* the cake. When we fight for time, giving students one of the basic conditions for writing and reading, we begin to make writers and readers.

*Atwell asks her students to take responsibility for keeping track of learning and progress. What are ways that music teachers can give responsibilities to music students?*

The system of record keeping I've created puts major responsibility on individuals. It's especially important for teachers with large classes and many students to invest time in preparing the means for kids to keep their own records and, once school starts, to teach them how to use the forms. When students select their own books for reading and ideas for writing, when everyone is working on a different task, following the paper trail could become a teacher's full-time job. At the Center for Teaching and Learning, Nancy Tindal, the kindergarten teacher, starts turning over record keeping responsibilities to her kids just as soon as they have a sense of letter sounds.

*Atwell asks a great question here: what do I need to know about my students? Read how she answers the question and think about how you would answer it. The answer will give you a lot of hints about how to assess your students and maybe even how to manage that assessment.*

As the teacher I have ultimate responsibility for what happens with my kids during our year together. This means that I keep records, too. For twenty years I've been working to streamline and simplify the information I chronicle. I ask myself again and again, as a teacher, *what do I really need to know?*

I need to know what each student is working on as a writer and reader at any given time. I need to know if they're staying on-task and finishing work, including their homework. I need to know what they need help with, when they're stuck or have made a breakthrough, where they've been-the patterns in their writing and reading over time-and where they might go next.

*There is an amazing array of things Atwell works on with her students (and she doesn't mention all possibilities here). Essentially, she has figured out a way to give every student the equivalent of private lessons on writing, even though she has all her students in one class.*

On the writing record I note each student's plans for writing workshop: what they tell me each day when I call the roll and take the status-of-the-class. I record topic, genre, and what the writer intends to do. The sample writing record shows students who are starting a new piece, continuing a work in progress or concluding one, editing, conferring with the or another student about problems they're having with content or craft, conferring with them about editorial issues I identified in a finished piece, brainstorming titles, proofreading, typing, developing a character for a short story, reading published models of a kind of writing, moving to a more appropriate genre, taking a break from a difficult project to whip off an easy one, collaborating with another writer, and abandoning a topic or genre that isn't working.

I fill out the reading record each time kids read in class. Often as I circulate I do nothing more than look over a reader's shoulder and note the page number. Other times I stop, confer, share an enthusiasm, extend one, or troubleshoot. Students know I'm coming, know I'm interested in their choices and responses, and know I will follow up to make sure they did the most important homework any English teacher can assign: reading.

Over a long history of experimentation with writing and reading records, I've come to understand how personal a decision it is when a teacher settles on a system of record keeping. We need to ask ourselves: What's useful to me as a teacher? What's manageable and convenient? What won't eat up my teaching time? What will help me know my students and be accountable to them? *What do I really need to know?*

*What are your expectations of your students? What information do you need to keep track of?*

### ***Establishing Expectations***

The longer I teach, the more I know what's possible and the less I'm willing to leave to chance. Although it would be nice some year to have perfect classes that intuited how to engage as writers and readers in a workshop, it hasn't happened yet, and I'm not holding my breath. I need to teach my students what I expect—often again and again, through the fall, until they get inside their new roles and responsibilities. But first I have to figure out what my expectations are. So I think on paper about what writers and readers do, about who my students are, about what I believe, what I know, and what my priorities should be as a teacher of writing and reading.

*Here is her answer. It is worth reading because she is expecting a lot from middle schoolers—and SHE GETS IT FROM THEM.*

Right from the start I hope for rich, authentic, adult-like experiences for my students. I want them to use writing to know themselves and the world and to discover what writing is good for. They should experiment across four basic genres-fiction, memoir, poetry, and exposition—to learn the elements of each and explore what each can do for them. They should understand the importance of working from quantity, of producing a lot of writing and seeing where it takes them (and know that I won't accept the notion of blocked writers any more than their math teacher would sanction blocked mathematicians). I want them to develop criteria as writers, to step back and consider what is working and what needs more work in their texts, and to set realistic goals for their writing. I want them to finish pieces of writing and bring sufficient writing to final copy so they can experience the satisfaction of completed work, and so I can teach them how to edit and proofread. I expect them, always, to use what they know about conventions as they compose—to punctuate, capitalize, spell, choose words, and paragraph as they go, as adults do, rather than go back into reams of "sloppy copy" and try to impose conventionality after the fact. I want them to be considerate of other writers: to take care of shared materials and equipment and respond to others' writing in thoughtful, productive ways. And I expect them to try to make literature every time they

write, to never be killing time by "doing another piece for the folder." We have just 175 days together as writers in a workshop. I want to make the most of every one of them. And so I try to set standards that are interesting, rigorous, and will give my kids diverse tastes of the real thing.

In reading I want kids to use literature to know themselves and the world, to discover what reading is good for. I expect them to experiment across authors, subjects, and genres and begin to notice how they engage, disengage, connect, predict, participate, and pace themselves as readers. They should understand the importance of quantity, of reading a lot and seeing where it takes them. I want them to finish books and reflect on their literary experiences: to develop criteria as readers and choosers of books, step back and consider what works and what needs more work in other writers' texts, and set realistic goals for their reading and responses to literature. I want them to be considerate of other readers, to take care of our classroom library, and to respond to others' literary responses in thoughtful, productive ways. And I expect them to have a literary experience every time they read, to never be killing time with a book they don't appreciate or, even better, love. So in August I think on paper about standards for reading that will both stretch my kids and bring them satisfaction.

### ***Rules for a Workshop***

I am always intrigued by the tension inherent in the act of writing, how it requires self-discipline and regularity yet thrives on the quirks of the individual writer. When I'm writing I write every day: I sit down at my table at 8:30 on a summer's morning and go at it until I drop or the rest of my life intrudes in a major way. But a tight, consistent schedule is just about the only linear feature of my writing behavior. I write notes to myself, make lists, stick Post-its on the lampshade, doodle, churn it out, cross it out, reread, rearrange, abandon, devise and revise outlines, proofread, and make piles on top of piles until I don't know what I've got and have to stop and clear the decks, mentally and physically. And all the while I'm still wearing my nightgown and bathrobe, sometimes until 3:00 in the afternoon, and praying that no one comes to the door. The structure has to be both tight and idiosyncratic if I'm to produce writing that's any good or get any better as a writer.

*Do you think that practicing music is highly idiosyncratic?*

At the conclusion of the groundbreaking study at Atkinson Academy, Donald Graves wrote about this tension:

When all the data were in and the information brewed down to the most important finding, we recorded that:

WRITING IS A HIGHLY IDIOSYNCRATIC PROCESS THAT VARIES FROM DAY TO DAY.

Variance is the norm, not the exception.

Good teaching enhances even greater variation. The more risks a writer takes, and the more tools put at writer's disposal to carry out an audacious intention, the more the writing will vary in quality. (1983, 270)

*Idiosyncratic: means unique to the individual. (I add this note because I have found this is an unusual word for many students and it's hard to get the meaning from this context).*

Writing and reading can vary, and writers and readers can grow, when the teacher creates a reliable environment and pushes kids to use it. My students and I live together in a room for almost ten months, and every day for almost ten months I try to inspire them, teach them what I know, hold them accountable for their knowledge, help them develop new habits and hone their criteria, and show them how to discover their intentions, processes, and strengths as writers and readers. Predictable routines underpin all of this.

The rules for writing and reading workshop are designed to help kids develop habits of mind and action that will support them as they go out on limbs. They're based in part on what successful writers and readers do, and in part on common sense about how these things can be accomplished in a room occupied by twenty-some writers and readers and a teacher who needs to be able to monitor, evaluate, and report on their progress.

### Rules for Writing Workshop

- 1. Save everything: it's all a part of the history of the piece of writing, and you never know when or where you might want to use it.
- 2. Date and label everything you write to help you keep track of what you've done (e.g., *notes*, *draft #1*, *brainstorming*).
- 3. When a piece of writing is finished, clip everything together, including the drafts, notes, lists, editing checksheet, and peerconference form, and file it in your permanent writing folder.
- 4. Record every piece of writing you finish on the form in your permanent writing folder. Collect data about yourself as a writer, look for patterns, and take satisfaction in your accomplishments over time.
- 5. Write on one side of the paper only and always skip lines or type double-spaced. Both will make revision, polishing, and editing easier and more productive for you.
- 6. Draft your prose writing in sentences and paragraphs. Draft your poems in lines and stanzas. Don't go back into a mess of text and try to create order. Format as you go.
- 7. Get into the habit of punctuating and spelling as conventionally as you can *while* you're composing: this is what writers do.

- 8. When composing on the word processor, print at least every two days. Then read the text with a pen in your hand, away from the computer, and see and work with the whole, rather than a part at a time on the screen.
- 9. Get into the habit of beginning each workshop by reading what you've already written. Establish where you are in the piece and pick up the momentum.
- 10. Understand that writing is thinking. Do nothing to distract me or other writers. Don't put your words into our brains as we're struggling to find our own.
- 11. When YOU confer with me, use as soft a voice as I use when I talk to you: *whisper*.
- 12. When you need to confer with peers, use a conference area and record responses on a peer-conference form so the writer has a reminder of what happened.
- 13. Maintain your proofreading list and refer to it when you self-edit.
- 14. Self-edit in a color different from the print of your text and complete an editing checklist to show what you know about conventions of writing.
- 15. Write as well and as much as you can.

#### Rules for Reading Workshop

- 1. You must read a book. Magazines, newspapers, and comic books don't have the chunks of text you need to develop fluency, and they won't help you discover who you are as a reader of literature.
- 2. Don't read a book you don't like. Don't waste time with a book you don't love when there are so many great ones out there waiting for you.
- 3. If you don't like your book, find another one. Browse, ask me or a friend for a recommendation, or check the "Favorite Books" list or display.
- 4. It's all right to reread a book you love. This is what readers do.
- 5. It's okay to skim or skip parts if you get bored or stuck; readers do this, too.
- 6. Record every book you finish or abandon on the form in your reading folder. Collect data about yourself as a reader, look for patterns, and take satisfaction in your accomplishments over time.
- 7. Understand that reading is thinking. Do nothing to distract me or other readers. Don't put your words into our brains as we're trying to escape into the worlds created by the authors of our books.
- 8. When you confer with me, use as soft a voice as I use when I talk to you: *whisper*.
- 9. Read (and write in your reading journal) the whole time.
- 10. Read as well and as much as you can.